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## Sport in Films: Symbolism versus Verismo. A France-United States Comparative Analysis

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# Sport in Films: Symbolism versus Verismo. A France-United States Comparative Analysis

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- 1 This article is part of a larger study on film genre which started off during a symposium on sports in films organized by Yann Descamps and Daniel Durbin. The issue tackled in this themed section – the political dimension of the mediated representation of sports – can also be examined through sports films for, as Jean-Michel Frodon underlined: “There is a natural kinship between cinema and the nation which rests on a common mechanism which they are made of – projection.”<sup>1</sup>
- 2 While sport is omnipresent in the American audiovisual landscape – one only has to watch cable networks in the United States or even in France, where American audiovisual productions are also widely broadcast – it is far from being the case as far as the French production is concerned. Some would answer that I am forgetting about soccer’s omnipresence on French television, sports networks such as *L’Équipe 21*, and movies such as *À Mort l’arbitre* (Jean-Pierre Mocky, 1984) or *Coup de tête* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1979), but that would be putting two different things on the same level, qualitatively and quantitatively. If we focus on the topic of this article, namely movie production, the ratio of fictions dedicated to sports is very superior in North America. Visiting websites which deal with cinema or list movies such as Imdb and others confirms this statement. Moreover, the corpus of scholarly work on the issue is far greater across the Atlantic. Since there is no precise figure to quote, and since it is complex to draw a quantitative comparison between industries which are structured differently, what these studies, rankings and analysis show is the strong dominance of American productions in both French and American rankings. These productions are different. Indeed, it is quite difficult to compare *À Mort l’arbitre* with *Any Given Sunday* (Oliver Stone, 1999), only to name a movie French audiences are familiar with. However, both were made by famous critically-acclaimed directors, and both tackle the dark side of these two countries’ most popular sports. While *À Mort l’arbitre* deals with

society's flaws by highlighting the mistreatment of athletes for the sake of profit, *Any Given Sunday* shows the violence of bewildered fans. The French production often presents some on-field action, and the American one only portrays sports through the penalty kick which sparked controversy and drama. Also, comparing *The Run* (Charles Olivier Michaud, 2014) – which features the struggle of an athlete facing both social and family issues – with *La Ligne droite* (Régis Wargnier, 2011) – which tells the story of an ex-convict turned guide for a disabled athlete, and how her new role helps her rebuild herself – brings us to the same conclusions. The part played by sports is not the same: while it is an entry point in American cinema, it is somewhat of an element of contextualization in French cinema.

- 3 However, there was a wave of films dedicated to sports in these two countries during the same period – the 1920s and 1930s. Those films focused on popular sports whose practice was on the rise in these two societies – namely baseball and football in the United States, and soccer and cycling in France, with both countries sharing a common interest in boxing. During this same period, both nations witnessed the advent of their first sports stars with baseball players such as Babe Ruth, Boxer Jack Dempsey, and football player Red Grange, boxer George Carpentier – who became even more famous after he lost to the much heavier and taller Dempsey due to a fractured hand in the second round –, or cyclist André Leducq and soccer player Marcel Domergue. We shall tackle these different approaches based on aesthetics, socio-economics or ideology. But first of all, we shall define the *sports film* genre.

## Film genre theory

- 4 Considering the genre as the product of the interaction between a language (in this case, cinema) and an institution (sports), we will question the social existence of the sports film genre (external criterion), and then try to define its attributes and properties (internal criteria). Those criteria, as written previously, include esthetical, ideological and socioeconomic dimensions.

## Sports film as a genre

- 5 Contrary to literature, where genres are associated to some hypertextuality or regulating conventions (to write a sonnet, one must follow specific rules), cinema uses what we shall call a programmed hypertextuality that literature does not elude either if we consider page turners and other serial productions. On another aspect, cinematic genres are usually defined in regard to the relation between the context and the plot.
- 6 The notion of genre does raise many debates on the different categories as well as criteria to be applied. Thus, American scholarly books offered the following list of famous, identifiable categories: Action, adventure, comedy, crime/gangster, drama, epics/historical, horror, musicals, science fiction, war, westerns.
- 7 Most of these genres were created at the end of the silent movie era: melodrama, western, horror movies, comedy, action and adventure, from swashbucklers to war movies. Musicals started with the era of talkies, and science fiction films appeared around the 1950s. The rise of the number of films and their diversity, linked to the different audiences, led analysts to come up with subcategories, thus stratifying the genres. These subcategories can also be identified through the narrative scheme – i.e.

characters, plot, and context. One of the most referenced categorizations is the one formulated by Tim Dirk: biographical films (“biopics”), “chick” flicks (or gal films), detective/mystery films, disaster films, fantasy films, film noir, “guy” films, melodramas or women’s “weepers”, romance films, sports films, supernatural films, or thrillers/suspense films. This website even proposes to subdivide this subdivision: aviation films, buddy films, caper films, chase films, espionage films, “fallen” woman films, jungle films, legal films, martial arts films, medical films, military films, parody films, police films, political films, prison films, religious films, road films, slasher films, swashbucklers, etc.<sup>2</sup>

- 8 We notice that the more we get into specific subcategories, the more they are sorted by content. The sports film genre is granted an intermediary status, as the genre is not defined according to its plot or theme. If we take a look at the history of film production, we can see that the “sports film” genre exists in representations and categorizations formulated by popular sources (Wikipedia, Vodcaster, Top100, etc.), as well as institutional ones (an article from the *e-Journal USA* review edited by the State Department dedicated to film business discussed this topic), or academic ones (Crawford, Erickson, Pearson and al., and Miller).<sup>3</sup> Demetrius Pearsons et al. released a quantitative study in which they identified 590 American movies over 65 years that they qualified as “sports films.”<sup>4</sup> Several books show the presence of the genre in the field of sports studies, in sociology and history, as well as in film studies. Sports films are often brought up in sociological and historical analysis as representations and constructs of social identities (they are relevant in terms of gender studies and racial studies) or intergroup relations (in the context of the Civil Rights struggle to represent the relations between African-Americans and the white majority, or during the Cold War to tackle the USA-USSR divide), but also as representations of the history of sport itself. In any case, the genre is not studied as such. It is seized as a *sui generis* reality, while its characteristics virtually stand unquestioned.

## Toward Defining Sports Films

- 9 In his own words, Glen Jones was very ambivalent while trying to define the “sports film” genre.<sup>5</sup> Demetrius Pearsons and al. underlined the difficulty in framing this genre because of the variety of themes tackled. Stephen D. Mosher showed the diversity in plots from comedy to tragedy, romance or satire,<sup>6</sup> while Charles Summerlin divided them into mythical, celebratory and biographical “genres.”<sup>7</sup> To conclude their studies, these authors wrote the following definition:

Our definition of a sport film, or film centrally focused on a sporting theme, consisted of themes or subjects focusing on a team, a sport saga, or a specific sport participant (i.e. athlete, coach, or agent) in which sporting events engaging the participants in athletics were the primary activity of the film and cognitive abilities predefined in a setting of ranking or winning or losing.<sup>8</sup>

- 10 However, this definition does not reflect the state of research on this genre, which went beyond a certain kind of tautological definition (for instance, a western takes place in the Western part of America) for, as stated earlier, sport lies at the intermediary level of a definition which implies aspects of the plot and theme. To use a popular saying, one shall not mistake sports films with sports in films.

11 We have to go back to defining the numerous criteria of a film genre. Rick Altman summed up the notion of film genre as it was defined in the literature. He brings out the following seven characteristics: a genre has a social function, and it is characterized by a repeating strategy and a cumulative economy which mobilizes a dual structure, some kind of predictability, and privileges intertextual references. These characteristics could be found in sports films:

- A dual structure based on a conflict of values leading the audience to focus on one character or the other alternately; the team (including or not the coach) could be considered as one single character.
- A repeating strategy: The use of similar shots and stories (see *Invictus*, Clint Eastwood, 2010), the creation of a genre iconography (with slow-motion sequences in track and field, boxing clubs filled with smoke and dust at dusk, footing on the beach, and triumphing home runs in baseball), conflicts solved by the same outcomes and messages (knowing the other, winning through facing obstacles together, going through adversity), i.e. every ideological dimension of sports in films.
- A cumulative economy: The movies follow an inter- and intra-textual serial strategy, i.e. they accumulate gags, scenes of panic; they accumulate goals, points and dunks through pulsing editing.<sup>9</sup>
- Predictability: The pleasure in the genre lies in the reaffirming of conventions which the audience knows and identifies in the film, i.e. the positive value of sports.
- A tendency for intertextual references: Sports films feature multiple references to great people and episodes in sports history, through the names of characters, cameos and so on.<sup>10</sup> Identifying them calls for a solid knowledge of sports history.
- A symbolic dimension attached to sounds, situations and images: The strong reconciliatory dimension in *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2001) and *Invictus* are materialized through final handshakes or hugs, while surpassing oneself and one's condition in boxing films is symbolized by the use of meat as hitting bags in *Rocky 2*.
- A social function allowing to fictionally resolve cultural or situational conflicts which society cannot settle.<sup>11</sup> We can name racial reconciliation (*Glory Road*, James Gartner, 2006), self-respect and teamwork (*Coach Carter*, Thomas Carter, 2005), victory over adversity (*We Are Marshall*, Christophe Beck, 2006), the possibility of making dreams come true (*Invincible*, Ericson Core, 2006), or the victory of (sports) values over (sports) commoditization (*Any Given Sunday*, 1999).

12 However, this set of characteristics does not provide formal features which could be heuristic for our purpose. Rick Altman proposes a definition which synthetizes the generic definitions founded on common traits (called *semantic elements*), and the generic definitions founded on relationships between placeholders (called *syntax*). Beyond the fact that this generic definition is unanimously accepted, the reason why we chose it is that it is not only based on the issue of theme, but also on construction, structural (syntactic) criteria which are linked to the part played by a genre within society.<sup>12</sup> If semantic criteria belong to social codes and representation, syntactic criteria support/structure the genre, its grammar, and meaning.

13 For instance, western films are characterized by their characters, settings, filming modes, and how these elements epitomize certain ideas of the *wilderness* and *civilization* (through the relations between the characters, between characters and places, to name a few). Thanks to this definition, we consider the existence of an autonomous "sports film" genre.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the film's format (a narrative) and length (a full-length film), the

semantic criteria defined by Altman also apply to the characters (coaches/athletes), the actors' performances (realism, physical play, physical and psychological performances as the athlete showcases a competitive frame of mind), the soundtrack (*in situ* or media announcing as well as cheers and applause from the crowd during sports scenes).<sup>14</sup>

14 The syntactic criteria are the following:

- Narrative strategy: drama/comedy in relation to the athletic performance and life lesson taught through the movie. Thus, if we refer to popular categories on the "sports movies" Wikipedia page, these movies are mainly classified as metagenre – dramas and comedies, with biopics as the third, less important category.<sup>15</sup>
- Team/narrative relations: The unfolding story is linked to the team's cohesiveness, i.e. the athlete(s)-coach(es) relation. The story follows the physical and psychological evolution of the characters and their close circles.
- Sport/narrative relation: Sport is an active agent in the production of meaning around the team's cohesiveness (failure, success and the reasons why they happened).
- Narrative/sport cycle relation: Practices and competitions are shown alternately as narrative stages which highlight a climax in every sequence.
- Image/sound relation: This follows the hierarchy between preparation and actualization. The truly narrative moments are not the sports scenes, which are often summed up through a short, fast-paced video clip with music following an energetic regimen.<sup>16</sup>

15 As explained in note #13, this list of criteria needs a few adjustments to be applied to sports films. The semantic criteria are more or less shared – sporting characters, emblematic locations such as stadiums, the sporting props, paradigmatic situations such as competitions – but the syntactic criteria seem to differ in both countries.

## Is the "Sports Film" an American Genre?

16 As perceived as such, the "sports film" genre was only illustrated by American examples. It was also the case in the institutional and academic analyses quoted earlier and it would tend to prove the genre's Americanness. Indeed, the genre does not seem to have been adopted by other cultures, even though other countries and geographical zones have produced their own genres such as the martial art film in South-East Asia, or the *lucha pelicula* in Mexico. However, another criterion comes into play in regard to the definition of sports practices: the institutional framework.<sup>17</sup> Nolwenn Mingant's work tends to validate this hypothesis: to globalize their productions, the majors would avoid promoting sports films as a strategy, or at least they would maintain them as low-budget productions targeting the local, national market.<sup>18</sup> A series of socioeconomic and sociocultural explanations upholds this idea.<sup>19</sup>

## The Studio Policy

17 Far from the artistic views of early French cinema or the curiosity aroused by the magic screen, the first broadcasting of sporting events took place in the 1890s, and they had commercial purposes. The expanding cinema industry used sport – which was itself on the rise. The "sports film" genre was a product of studio policy by definition. Andrew Miller showed that the 1926-1941 period witnessed the success of "American college sports movies."<sup>20</sup> He underlined that Hollywood's interest in sports films, and especially football films, was based on this pastime's popularity and made it an attractive subject.

In the meantime, the newly institutionalized sports world found in cinema an opportunity to be broadcast to larger audiences.<sup>21</sup> Because of smaller social barriers between genders than in boxing or baseball, football movies could attract female audiences: the relationships between girls (cheering for their boyfriends) and boys were mapping out the storylines. Moreover, college football – a WASP, upper-class sport – become democratic and open to other socio-economic groups. This phenomenon gave another opportunity to sell plots showing poor students dealing with the social gap separating them from their teams and classmates. Most of all, it was another opportunity to attract a broader audience.<sup>22</sup>

- 18 During this period, the birth of the first sports stars – Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Knute Rockne, Red Grange – became a source of inspiration for the *athletic American Dream*, and it caught the attention of the studios: numerous successful athletes and Olympic champions appeared in films as themselves or in different parts.<sup>23</sup> As Seán Crosson (2014) underlines:

Such recognizable sporting figures in some cases added considerably to the appeal of the films in which they appeared, particularly “assigning low-keyed films a magnetic box office attraction they would never otherwise have had” (Umphlett, 1984: 29).<sup>24</sup>

- 19 During the 1940s, these appearances turned into real parts, and several biopics dedicated to sporting figures were shot – *Knut Rockne, All American* (Lloyd Bacon, 1940), *Gentleman Jim* (Raoul Walsh, 1942), *The Pride of the Yankees* (Sam Wood, 1942). Steve Neale considers that these biopics are a linking cycle between sports considered as “an instance of popular culture to wartime populism and to martial values like fighting spirit, tactical awareness and the acceptance of loss and occasional defeat.”<sup>25</sup> Then, the decline of sports films – which occurred in the 1960s according to Pearson et al. – coincided with the decline of the studios’ industrial strategy.

## The Role of Sports in American Society

- 20 In American society, organized sport was actually an institution with a strong social dimension. Between the 1870s and the 1940s, sports became the most popular cultural activity in the United States. Basketball was invented, college football turned into a mass spectacle, and baseball reached the status of *America’s pastime*. Sports also became part of educational curricula, a phenomenon illustrated by Gary Dickerson’s emphasis on the importance of baseball as a tool for social integration teaching American values.<sup>26</sup> Both promoters and athletes linked countless virtues to it, defending the need for sports to assure the individual’s vitality and the nation’s grandeur through often-ideological speeches. Nowadays, the belief in sports’ social role is still lasting: it is thought to bolster the teaching of and respect for values which are essential to Americanness, such as competitiveness, equal opportunities, or social mobility. These are widely spread in society, and they solidify a close relation with “the imagined community who founded the nation.”<sup>27</sup> The EJ (*e-Journal USA*) issue dedicated to the film industry underlines the role played by sports in institutional representations:

Sports are part of the very fabric of American life, discourse, and lexicon [...]. The centrality of sports in American life is amply reflected in contemporary American cinema, (with) films featuring virtually every major sport, from football, basketball, baseball, and hockey, to boxing, horse racing, and even surfing.<sup>28</sup>



- 21 Cinema mirrors social issues. As Miller wrote, this is why college football films appeared in 1930s America, especially because of scholarships being more and more available to students from lower classes. The plots echoed the potential role of football as social equalizer (see above). As a college sport mostly played by middle-class young men who happened to go to the movies, football was perceived as a modern industrial sport. This trend increased, leading to football dethroning baseball during the 1950s, a sport that was considered older and more rural but whose success was attached to its Americanness.<sup>29</sup> As western movies interpret the opposition and complementarity of the wilderness and civilization – one of the US's founding myths – sport films work on the duality and complementarity of the individual and the group, whatever the extend of this one – from the athlete/coach couple to wider communities such as a team, a college, a village, or a nation.

## Myth and Community-Building Sports

- 22 As a form of entertainment and social and cultural development, sport was also one of the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century myth-builders according to authors, as it gave birth to the then-famous *athletic American Dream*.<sup>30</sup> While sports and cinema were perceived as two tools for social integration in a period of immigration, they mixed in a film genre which gained more popularity during the Great Depression. We can see that through the growing number of people practicing *community-building sports* such as football (the first team sport to be featured in a movie), baseball, and basketball. The sports most featured on the big screen were boxing (140), football (87), car racing (80), and baseball (72). They made up for about two thirds of sports films which were produced from 1930 to 1995. Basketball was featured in 27 movies – 20 of them being produced since 1970, while its number of players rose. Sports sociology finds in sports films a showcase of representations built by the American society for itself, as well as an entry point to examine and analyze its culture. Once more, institutional articles illustrate this, as the *E Journal USA* review clearly underlined: “Reflecting Americans’ love for sports of all kinds, U.S. filmmakers turn repeatedly to sports themes to convey messages much larger than the stories themselves.”<sup>31</sup> Pearsons et al.<sup>32</sup> showed that, as prisms of the American culture, the scenarii and tones of sports films matched the social issues of their times: selflessness and character-building in the 1930s, hyperpatriotism and nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, democratization and social awareness, as well as the rise of counter culture leading to the decline of traditional sports such as football and even boxing as a symbol of hope for social mobility<sup>33</sup> during the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of antiheroes and non-ethical practices as well as the microcosmic representation of society in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Andrei Markovitz showed that the American identity was partly built upon “its” sports – meaning its three main sports allowing a distinction from England as they were local adaptations of English sports – baseball for cricket, football for rugby – or creation of their own practices in the case of basketball.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the three most quoted subgenres within the sports film category are football films, baseball films, and boxing films.<sup>36</sup> Altman defined the notion of *generic community* based on the common acceptance of a label attached to a group of films, this label implying that the audience shared a view on the world.<sup>37</sup> It is unquestionably the case with American sports films, as their very existence is



acknowledged by scholars and audiences who at least share a common view on the part played by sports in American society and culture.

## A French School or an Authorial Logic?

- 23 The French situation is for the more different. If we consider so-called sports films, there are way less productions, and among these, we find social critics such as *À Mort l'arbitre*, tall stories which vaguely tackle sports such as *Les Fous du stade* (Claude Zidi, 1972), aesthetic projects such as *Zidane, un portrait du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Philippe Parreno, Douglass Gordon, 2004), and biopics such as *Édith et Marcel* (Claude Lelouch, 1982). In regard to the diversity of these films, it is difficult to unite them within a single genre. Moreover, they are rarely described as “sports films”, for sport often serves as background, a reference to lower classes through soccer and cycling, or is used as a part of the characters’ construct – a Southerner will play rugby, while a tenacious character will practice a sport which requires stamina. Going back to Altman’s criteria, those elements do not hold any particular meaning in the inner structure of the text. However, sport is far from being totally missing in French society and films, as we noted earlier. As it was the case in the United States, the golden age of sports in France took place between the two World Wars: French sport was then celebrated in novels, poems, and statues, and it became an important part of French society.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, popular sports such as cycling and soccer were praised in films as they allowed to build the myth of a French sports culture.<sup>39</sup> The reasons for the non-creation of this genre in the French context lie elsewhere.

## The Absence of Studio Policy and a Weak Production in the Genre

- 24 The first reason is the absence of a studio policy. France does not follow an industrial cultural strategy like the United States as explained by Raphaëlle Moine: “In this context, which is different from the studios’, the process of genre-building also goes through expansion, but it adds new traits and characteristics, sometimes derived from a mix of national elements and American ones, to existing, national genres.”<sup>40</sup> The notion is not clearly framed in the context of the French market. Thus, so-called “boxing films” refer to both comic fictions and broadcastings of bouts in theaters in the two weeks following the events.<sup>41</sup>
- 25 Pierre Sorlin wrote that there is only one genre we could qualify as a French genre: police films, also called “gangster movies” or “French film noir” which were made over four decades with an insistence on inter-individual relations, a particular care for the description of the atmosphere, and a pessimistic tone, to name a few.<sup>42</sup> The model for genre-creating in Hollywood – with a strategy of studio organization and competition between companies – or in the cultural spaces of an autonomous cinema production strong enough to digest outer influences is different from the one in non-autonomous cinema productions caring to maintain a cultural identity and resist the American cinema dominance since World War I and also during the 1950s.<sup>43</sup> The concept of school or *école* was born during this period, establishing cinema as an art form, away from American industrial ways, even though French cinema pondered following the American industrial model when it tried to recapture its lost dominance. Critics were working on the rise of productions linking artistic success with national identity

(*réussite artistique et identité nationale*), based on the heritage and reappropriation of French authors and masterpieces.<sup>44</sup> This *cinéma des nations* lasted until the 1930s and was also followed by authorial logics mostly highlighted by the *Nouvelle Vague*. Movies were then rated on the basis of an individual view, the director's, as he/she influenced the film's characters, aesthetic, and atmosphere with his/her vision: "As they wanted to be seen as authors and not mere film makers, French directors remained aloof from genres which would hurt their reputation."<sup>45</sup> As a result, the authorial logic undoubtedly went before the genre logic, making *Million Dollar Baby* (2005) a Clint Eastwood movie more than a boxing film in the eyes of spectators, while this genre already existed in France (see below).

## A Despicable Object

- 26 Referring to Rick Altman's criteria, we shall consider the issue of reception. As Pierre Sorlin wrote, the French spectator is actually "less film-addict than film-amateur" (*moins cinéphage que cinéophile*<sup>46</sup>), while genre films are considered undignified by the French. Sport is also considered as undignified in the French collective imagination. Films tackling sports are often used as an opportunity to denigrate a stupefying, corrupted environment, as in *À Mort l'arbitre*, *Coup de tête* or *Le Vélo de Guislain Lambert* (Philippe Harel, 2001). This phenomenon dates back to a long time, since *La Fausse maîtresse* (André Cayatte, 1942) showed how rugby kept men away from their homes and made them neglect their wives, and *Rue des prairies* (Denys de La Patellière, 1959) denounced the corrupted world of professional cycling. Very far from myth-building, symbols, and an emphasis on the values of sports, French movies reveal distrust toward sports – which can be seen in books by Jean-Marie Brohm and Marc Perelman<sup>47</sup> – as well as toward genre films. Thus, French commentators prefer categorizing *boxing films* – an American subgenre which experienced somewhat of a golden era in France – as *films noirs* over sports films.<sup>48</sup> More generally, the French specialists in film genres do not take it into account, even as a subgenre.
- 27 In a context encouraging the denunciation of athletes' misbehaviors – from soccer players wandering to doping scandals in cycling and corruption in any sports federation – sport is clearly not a topic the French film industry would capitalize on. Moreover, even though movies do often highlight its values, sport does not have a *nation-building power*, as the French situation calls for identifying to a national identity rather than an identity in the process of being constructed<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, it is difficult to consider soccer as a *national pastime*, popular though it is, for it was imported for England. Often despised, sports became a pretext to burlesque in movies showing some amateur totally lacking mastery over a sport and winning by mistake, as is the case in Tati's sports parodies (*Oscar champion de tennis*, 1932). Also, in early films, boxing is often part of a comic narrative (*Soigne ton gauche*, René Clément, 1936).

## A Genre with no Structuring Language

- 28 These examples show the lack of compatibility with the genre's syntax. If the serial logic as well as the David-against-Goliath duel narrative are to be found in these films, the symbolic dimension of sports – or at least its social function – is often tarnished, as we have seen. In the absence of any genre logic, there are also only a few intertextual references. But above all, as it is left aside by film enthusiasts, sports predictability is

not compatible with films which – for writing purposes – are built on luck as the main source for comedy as well as the best way to reproduce the glorious uncertainty of sports on the big screen.<sup>50</sup> More generally, if we focus on great movements following the *cinéma des nations*' aesthetic realism, Truffaut's *Qualité française* and the *Nouvelle Vague*, we note that both these two movements' film grammars were not compatible with sports. The former was based on dialogues, while the latter was based on studio-making, settings, scriptwriting, adaptations, and costumes. They did not match sports' modernity and need for outdoor action. The last movement was based on a light technical setting and it excluded realism. Once more, this did not allow the recreating and filming of the sports spectacle, which often calls for a heavier setting.<sup>51</sup> These explanations mirror the American situation. As it does not follow a serial logic, and denounces sports and their political use, the French socio-economic and intellectual context does not favor the exploitation of sports films. The films mentioned above follow a formal approach more than a symbolic one. François Amy de la Bretèque underlined that the spectacle of sport – being it the Tour de France or a rugby match – came first, while the performance and its symbolic dimension only came second in terms of value in the first films featuring sports heroes.<sup>52</sup>

## Beyond these Explanations

- 29 After comparing the roles played by sports in the media and cultures of two societies sharing strong and connected film cultures, we should also tackle the difference between emotions which are conveyed through sports and films.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as Moine underlined, “film genres bear with them and within them the mark of other literary or spectacular genres with which they sometimes share a degree of vagueness or preciseness.”<sup>54</sup> In the case of our study, the notion of spectacular genre would refer to sports contests – mediatized or not. This explains the different importance granted to sports films in the French and American cultures: when in the American culture, sports films belong to a genre, in France, they form a more or less heterogeneous collection. The criteria for making these films are diverse. Critics (such as *Les cahiers du cinema*) and academic reviews as well as testimonies from actors and spectators bring up a systematic comparison between films and sports broadcasting which always ends up in favor of the latter, as the poetic dimension is not associated with cinema in that regard. This view was already shared in the 1920s and 1930s when the then-recurring use of game action in film editing was born.<sup>55</sup> Representational movies gathered actors and professional athletes, and strong ties were built between the film and sports industries.<sup>56</sup> For instance, Descoins, scriptwriter of *Le Roi de la pédale* (Maurice Champreux, 1925), was a former sportswriter, and the chosen actors – Biscot, Préjean, and Gabin to a lesser extent – turned more or less professional. On the contrary, Carpentier shot his own biopic in as early as 1914 (*Le roman de Carpentier*) before starting his career as an actor once he hung up his gloves, to reenact his making as a boxer. Images of his fights were sometimes edited with images from the films. As a movie unanimously acclaimed by the rugby-loving community, *La Grande passion* (André Hugon, 1928) owed its success to the help of the Stade Toulousain club, players and international players who wrote and shot the movie. The French strategy of verismo does not match the genre system as it is linked with symbolism. Indeed, what makes the value of sports films and also allows to attract audiences other than aficionados – as it is the case with *The Endless Summer* (Bruce Brown, 1968) – is the status of sports as an *omnibus* subject, as Pierre

Bourdieu wrote.<sup>57</sup> The French audience is looking for a filmed sports contest, while the American audience is more attached to the symbolic and cultural dimension of sports. Therefore, so-called *cheerleading* films can be categorized within the sports film genre.<sup>58</sup> In a way, the sports film genre implies another discourse on sports which allow real or fictitious storytelling through the values attached to sport in realistic or humanistic movies from mainstream productions. While French spectators do not find this in films, they do find it in sports reporting, as reporters never miss an opportunity to teach *life lessons*.

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## ENDNOTES

1. "Il existe une affinité de nature entre cinéma et nation, qui repose sur un mécanisme commun, qui les constitue l'un et l'autre : la projection." Jean-Michel Frodon, "La projection nationale: cinéma et nation," *Cahiers de médiologie*, 3, 1998: 135.
2. Tim Dirks, *Film Genres*. <accessed on May 12, 2012>.
3. David J. Firestein, "Fields of Dreams: American Sports Movies," *E journal USA*, 12 (6), 2007.
4. Demetrius W. Pearson, Russell L., Curtis, Allen C. Haney and James J. Zhang, "Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930-1995," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 27 (2), 2003.
5. Glen Jones, "In praise of an 'invisible genre'? An ambivalent look at the fictional sports feature film," *Sport in Society*, 11 (2-3), 2008.
6. Stephen D. Mosher, "The white dreams of god": the mythology of sport films," *Arena Review*, 7 (2), 1983.
7. Charles T. Summerlin, "The athletic hero in film and fiction," in *Sports in American society*, ed. William J. Baker and John M. Carroll (Saint Louis: River City, 1983).
8. Demetrius W. Pearson, et al., "Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930-1995," 149.
9. Jean-Marc Vernier, "Nouvelle forme scénique des jeux TV."
10. For instance, Tom McLaren, one of the characters in *Vertical Limit*, was named by the director after fellow New Zealander Bob McLaren – a pilot and founder of the mythical McLaren racing team. In *Any Given Sunday*, five members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame do cameos as coaches of the five teams faced by the *Miami Sharks* – Bob St. Clair plays the part of the *Minnesota Americans* coach, Y.A. Tittle coaches of the *Chicago Rhinos*, Dick Butkus is the coach of the *California Crusaders*, Warren Moon coaches the *New York Emperors* and Johnny Unitas is the coach of the *Dallas Knights*.
11. Actually, sports films are allegorical by definition (cf. David Rowe, "If you film it, will they come? Sports on Film," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 22 (4), 1998), and sports films promote the *Athletic American Dream*.
12. Rick Altman, "Cinema and genre." *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, 1996, 283.
13. R. Altman does not cite sports film as a genre, but he mentions boxing films as the product of a genrification process, and baseball and surfing films as minor genres.
14. If we compare this with R. Altman's work on musicals, sports scenes –which are metaphors for a psychological evolution which belong to diegesis with their images from diegetic media (see *Any Given Sunday*) – would stand more as the equivalent of music scenes than the soundtrack itself.
15. However, we can question the status of biopics, which would stand as a metagenre more than a subgenre to me.
16. Jean-Marc Vernier, "Nouvelle forme scénique des jeux TV," » *Quaderni*, 4, 1988, 57-63.
17. Depending on definitions, a physical practice is called *sport* on the basis of the following criteria: A set of motor situations; a set of rules, Stakes related to competitiveness; an institutional framework. Thus, this definition implies to be affiliated to a federation – which does not appear in the *lucha pelicula* – and to be set in the framework of official competitions – which is not to be found in martial art movies.
18. Nolwenn Mingant, "Entre mondial et local : le jeu d'équilibriste des majors hollywoodiennes," *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine*, 1, 2009. <accessed on September 19, 2016>.
19. It may be argued that there are numerous sports films in Australia or Canada. But, as Lorenz underlines: "Likewise, the United States gained a stranglehold on the Canadian movie market in the 1920s. Canada was regarded as Hollywood's 'domestic' box office, and almost all of the movies Canadians watched were made in the United States." Stacy Lorenz, "A Lively Interest on the Prairies: Western Canada, the Mass Media, and a 'World of Sport' 1870-1939," *Journal of sport history*, 2000, 19.

American baseball teams and stars, movies, magazines, and radio programs, brought Canada close to the USA in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Concerning Australia, R. Fotheringham is very cautious about Australian sports films. He demonstrates that there are few movies dedicated to sport in the Australian film industry – these productions trying to erase the Australian roots from their plots for exportation purposes. The most part of the corpus brought up by this author is made of racing movies, which are borderline cases – races are considered as a game more than a sport; see # 16. Nowadays, there is a proper film industry in both these countries, partly producing sports films dedicated respectively to ice skating/hockey and surfing, but deeply rooted in the American seminal production. For the sake of the comparison, we shall focus on the USA.

20. Andrew C. Miller, “The American Dream Goes to College: The Cinematic Student Athletes of College Football,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43 (6), 2010.

21. Andrew C. Miller, “The American Dream Goes to College: The Cinematic Student Athletes of College Football,” 1226.

22. Altman underlines: “As genres gain coherence and win audiences, their influence in all aspect of the cinema experience grows. For production teams, generic norms provide a welcome template facilitating rapid delivery of quality film products. Screen-writers increasingly conceive their efforts in relation to the plot formulas and character types associated with regular genres.” (Altman, “Cinema and genre.” *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, 1996, 276).

23. See James E. Bryant and Mary Mc Elroy, *Sociological dynamics of sport and exercise* (Englewood: Morton Publishing Company, 1997).

24. Seán Crosson, “All this must come to an end. Through talking: dialogue and troubles cinema,” in *The Crossings of Art: Aesthetics and Culture in Ireland*, Ruben Moi, Charles Armstrong, and Brynhildur Boyce (Eds.). Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014.

25. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 54.

26. Gary E Dickerson, *The cinema of baseball: Images of America, 1929-1989* (Westport: Meckler, 1991).

27. Peter Marquis, “La balle et la plume,” *Transatlantica*, 2, 2011. <accessed on October 3, 2012>.

28. David J. Firestein, “Fields of Dreams: American Sports Movies.” *E journal USA*, 12 (6), 2007, 9.

29. Thus, as for Miller, the making of college football films was motivated by the concerns in 1930s America, especially over the growth of the scholarship system.

30. James E. Bryant and Mary Mc Elroy, *Sociological dynamics of sport and exercise* (Englewood: Morton Publishing Company, 1997), among others.

31. David J. Firestein, “Fields of Dreams: American Sports Movies,” 9.

32. Demetrius W. Pearson, et al., “Sport Films: Social Dimensions Over Time, 1930-1995.”

33. Baseball movies are still being produced due to the memorial dimension which is specific to this sport.

34. We shall underline the decline of sports films in the 1960s due to these same reasons.

35. Andrei S. Markovits, “Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas de football aux États-Unis? L'autre 'exceptionnalisme' américain,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 26, 1990, 23.

36. We shall note the rise of surfing films in the 1980s. The rise of a new genre is the result of a kind of subdivision of existing genres by producers as an answer to the viewers' estimated expectations and observed behaviors.

37. Altman, *Film/genre*.

38. Laurent Veray, “Aux origines du spectacle sportif télévisé : le cas des vues Lumière,” in *Montrer le sport, photographie, cinéma, télévision*, dir. Laurent Veray et Pierre Simonet, (Paris : INSEP, 2000).

39. These practices were popular in two ways, as they were broadcast first, and to mass audiences.

40. “Dans ce contexte, qui n'est pas celui des studios, le processus de genrification opère aussi par expansion, mais il greffe à des genres existants, et souvent nationaux, des déterminations et des traits



nouveaux, ou eux-mêmes dérivés d'un mélange d'éléments nationaux et d'éléments américains." Raphaëlle Moine, *Les genres du cinéma* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2002), 137.

41. These "film rights" were quite important in the cinema economy.

42. Pierre Sorlin, "Le cinéma français a-t-il échappé à la tentation des genres ?" in *Le Cinéma français face aux genres*, dir. Raphaëlle Moine (Paris : Association Française de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cinéma, 2005).

43. As soon as it was shot, *Le roi de la pédale* was promoted by both the cinema and sports press as an answer from the French to American cinema.

44. Christophe Gauthier, "Le cinéma des nations: invention des écoles nationales et patriotisme cinématographique (années 1910-années 1930)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 4, 2004, 62.

45. "Les réalisateurs français, soucieux d'être considérés comme des auteurs et non comme de simples metteurs en images se sont tenus éloignés des genres qui nuiraient à leur réputation." Pierre Sorlin, "Le cinéma français a-t-il échappé à la tentation des genres?" 21. Authors as well as actors were reluctant to be associated with a single genre for those same reasons.

46. Pierre Sorlin, "Le cinéma français a-t-il échappé à la tentation des genres ?" 22-23.

47. Jean-Marie Brohm, *Les meutes sportives : critique de la domination* (Paris : Editions L'Harmattan, 1993). Marc Perelman, *Le sport barbare: critique d'un fléau mondial* (Paris: Editions Michalon, 2012).

48. Even though boxing movies share some characteristics with films noirs such as those tackled earlier, and preferring urban settings, categorizing these movies as such means approaching them differently – just as much as considering *Raging Bull* a M. Scorsese movie and not a boxing movie would be. As social psychology showed, the way we categorize things reflects our view on the world.

49. Thus, Stanislas Frenkiel ("Larbi Ben Barek, Marcel Cerdan et Alfred Nakache : icônes de l'utopie impériale dans la presse métropolitaine (1936-1944) ?", *Staps*, 80, 99-113) showed North African athletes were the objects of an *indétermination catégorielle* allowing to homogenize Alfred Nakache, Larbi Ben Barek and Marcel Cerdan in terms of identity, the press introducing them as French from 1936 to 1942, thus reflecting the imperial logic. On the other hand, sports only became part of the curricula to complete hygienist goals, even though Republican gym societies were also conveying Patriotic values.

50. François Amy de la Bretèque, "De Biscot à Gabin, les héros sportifs dans le cinéma français, évolution du système du vedettariat et trajectoire d'héroïsation (1925 - 1965)," in *Montrer le sport, photographie, cinéma, télévision*, dir. Laurent Véray et Pierre Simonet, (Paris : Les Cahiers de l'INSEP, 2000).

51. French directors actually often linked the limits to the representation of sports in films with a lack of technical and financial means.

52. François Amy de la Bretèque, "De Biscot à Gabin," 93.

53. See Dominique Sipièrre, ed., *Cinéma américain et théories françaises: images critiques croisées*, *Revue française d'études américaines*, 2 (88), 2001.

54. "Les genres cinématographiques portent avec eux et en eux la marque d'autres genres, littéraires ou spectaculaires, dont ils partagent parfois le degré d'indétermination ou de précision." Raphaëlle Moine, *Les genres du cinéma*, 24.

55. See the "Rugby et cinema" section in *Midi Olympique Magazine*, 143, May 2012, 50-51.

56. Another aspect in the comparison with sports is the idea of a competition between films and sports: A racer arguably told Biscot, the leading role in *Le roi de la pédale*: "I don't like cinema, it does the real Tour de France wrong" (*Je n'aime pas le cinéma, ça fait du tort au vrai tour de France*). See François Amy de la Bretèque, "De Biscot à Gabin," 92.

57. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision* (Paris: Liber, 1996), 16.

58. The genre's commercial exploitation is second to the audience's expectations.

## ABSTRACTS

As sport does, cinema stands as a powerful tool for identifying and projecting oneself. After having defined the “sports film” genre, this study shows how it seems to be a product of American culture. Through a systematic comparison between French and American films, this paper highlights the different axiologies envisioned through these productions by audiences from both sides of the Atlantic – for ideological and aesthetic reasons.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Sports films, France, United States, film genre, sports values.

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